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Commentary

The distribution of postgraduates in UK geography departments

Passmore's (1998) commentary on the role of folk tales and corridor talk in the reproduction of an academic discipline struck me in the context of the competitive culture that has been created in UK geography. Gossip is not just individual, making and blighting careers, but also institutional - about which departments are looking stronger than 'rivals' and so forth. In marked contrast to all the claims for excellence academics are drilled to write, it is in the arena of gossip that insecurity abounds; insecurity and a good dose of misinformation, half-truths, and Chinese whispers. It was in the context of such discussions about postgraduate recruitment that I pondered the myths and stories circulating. So what I want to do is present some of the collated official figures in a naive description of how many postgraduates are where. The material is all gleaned from official and public sources -- though sometimes not readily available public sources. They need all the usual caveats about official statistics, especially those derived from returns to Funding Councils where institutions have a financial interest in generating as high a number as they can. Of course, these figures are less the answer to rumours than the start of new rounds of speculation. I hope they are of interest to UK-based scholars and those overseas who may from time to time be writing references or advising students on places to go. While the details may be specific, the UK is not alone in drives to measure performance and assess relative standing (see, for instance, Kong, 1999). The nature of the indicators vary largely to suit the authors -- so whereas in the UK 'research student' numbers are regarded by state funding bodies as an indicator of 'research output' (sic), other institutions in other countries have devised global league tables which omit research students altogether. I do not propose to begin to unpack what the correct criteria might be for such measures. The point is that through their existence they shape policy and practice in departments which either believe them or are compelled to play games according to those rules. Given that situation, this small piece inevitably plays a dual role in both outlining some 'results' and feeding back in to the process. I want to start with a brief sketch of the recent exercises and reviews and their effect on the climate of postgraduate research in the UK, which may be all too familiar to some, then look at the figures for both total numbers, and, more relevantly to this journal, the distribution of centrally state funded social science students.

Trends and pressures: grounds for speculation

UK higher education, like the rest of the public sector, has become driven by an audit culture which seeks a more and more fine-grained analysis of performance. In the absence of 'market indicators' a whole raft of other forms of indicators have been developed. Universities are responding to pressures from outside funding bodies which are themselves having to account for the disbursement of public funds. The state funded research councils, led by the Economic and Social Research Council

(ESRC), adopted a sanctions policy in the late 1980s based on thesis-completion rates. Failure to get, at that time, 40% of PhD students to submit (not, interestingly, to pass) within 4 years of their commencing led to institutions being blacklisted and barred from receiving new recruits. Logically anywhere with two or fewer students in a cohort, had to ensure both submitted on schedule or face sanctions. The ESRC has persistently repeated that it regards completion rates as an indicator of good supervision (and, implicitly, does not care with others think). Recently both the ESRC and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) have moved to a 70% completion rate figure.

This squeeze at the completion end of the process is matched by a progressive introduction of 'research training' requirements at the commencement of postgraduate research. The ESRC requires that 60% of the first year of a PhD should be 'training'. That is, something around 960 student hours, or 29 full weeks, of learning activities should be devoted to a prescribed range of skills training in research methods, current ideas in social science and geography, and so forth. The model is implicitly that this is the equivalent to the taught component of a one-year masters degree. Let me leave aside the squeeze on PhD students and look at how this training is assessed. In an amazingly effective piece of leverage, the ESRC (which funds nationally around 30 students through this scheme each year), imposed 'recognition criteria' that all human geography students not just the ones it funded, had to undergo this training or it would not allow anyone at the institution to apply for a state studentship. Every four years the ESRC conducts a recognition exercise, demanding something in the order of a 24-page form to outline the research training and how it meets the criteria established. One of the criteria is 'research culture' in part indicated by number of PhD students registered. In the last exercise in 1998, some 30 departments applied -- already a self-selection by those that thought either the application or putting on a training course worth the cost. Out of these some 25 were recognised to take students from undergraduate to doctorate.[(1)] In the last exercise there were some notable absentees, though currently an 'interim' recognition process may increase the number once more.

One response has been to create masters courses that meet the recognition criteria and thus prequalify candidates who go on to PhDs and exempt them from most further training courses -- so-called Research Training (RT) status. Out of 35 'geography' masters courses noted, the ESRC recognised 7 as meeting RT status and allocated funded places to 6.[(2)] In summary, then, the speculation is that these factors are leading to a concentration of students in larger, already successful, departments, that can boast large numbers of students already and have the ability and resource to invest in providing research training courses.

Pattern of postgraduate study

First a word about the data. Two main sources are available. Relatively simple is the ESRC data, which allow a listing of all human geography' studentships it currently funds. It is then a matter of simply, if tediously, extracting each one and looking at where it is held. The data used here are students funded in the academic year 1999 - 2000, that is those starting between 1997 and 1999.[(3)] Previously funded students now in their fourth year are not included in these figures. It includes awards in open competition and those held 'collaboratively' with part funding from nonacademic partners. It counts those submitted to the human geography competition but thus misses those who may be considered 'geographical' in other categories, and those who may be in other cognate departments (say development studies) but entered other competitions. It also misses the 'arts' awards in geography from the British Academy

and its successor, the Humanities Research Board. The second set of data is returns to 'research activity surveys', which feed in to funding formulae, from Higher Education Funding Councils. Those for England and Northern Ireland have data for 1997 - 98 and 1998 - 99, available publicly, while Scotland and Wales supplied data upon request with the former based on 1997 - 98. These data also cast their net more widely. The surveys measure 'research students' which includes PhD students, MPhil students[(4)], and those doing 'research masters' (which are conducted through independent study rather than taught components). It needs to be borne in mind then that some institutions effectively are listing only or mostly PhD students while others have sometimes large contingents of students in other categories boosting their overall figures. There is also some ambiguity about what 'institution' means, with some departments entered as two different 'schools' and other schools amalgamated depending on faculty structures. This wider measure reflects that research council funding supports only a proportion -- and indications from these data are about one fifth -- of research students.

In light of these problems -- and the possibility of devising other categories which could be significant (say numbers of taught masters students, total PhD registration) the following needs a healthy dose of salt. It should also be added that where two years are recorded there is a fair amount of volatility, given the small numbers in each institution (the highest shift being an increase of 89% year on year, and 8 institutions in the England and Northern Ireland data show fluctuations of over one third year to year).

In terms of the numbers of institutions there are 69 centres returning entries in the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise), with 47 'geography' institutions on Funding Council data with research students and currently 28 hosting ESRC students.[(5)] This is unsurprising given that university-funded awards are likely to be spread more evenly than external funds. In terms of concentration, over 50% of all ESRC awards went to four institutions (see table 1). Perhaps a more useful way of dividing the institutions would be to say three have over fifteen students (that is, more than five per year), then there follows another group of nine each of which has three or more -- so on average one award or more per year. It is remarkable here that Oxford lost its recognition two years ago and so this number is a legacy effect from before then. The remaining sixteen institutions have fewer than one per year (pro rata) -- and at least two are probably affected by loss of recognition. The data could be sliced in other ways (say separating the three institutions averaging two or more per year, but fewer than five). Given that these awards are based on a series of open competitions, the degree of concentration is perhaps greater than expected. It is in part a concentration by reputation where the topics for study suggest the role of key individuals and themes for institutions -- they are awarded studentships in what gossip would say are their strong fields. Given that proposals go to a panel of expert assessors who have to include an assessment of how the proposal fits with the institution this is perhaps to be expected, but perhaps also a little depressing in terms of encouraging innovation.

Table 1. ESRC studentships currently in UK geography, by department

Institution	Number	Institution	Number
Bristol	20	East Anglia -- environmental science	2

University College London	16	Lancaster -- Centre for Environmental Studies	2
Cambridge	16	Southampton	2
Oxford	8	Liverpool	2
Royal Holloway	6	Nottingham	1
Durham	6	Leeds	1
Birmingham	5	Aberystwyth	1
Edinburgh	4	Open	1
Newcastle	4	Cranfield	1
Manchester	4	Queen Mary and Westfield	1
Sheffield	3	Loughborough	1
East Anglia -- development studies	3	Kings College	1
Aberdeen	2	Exeter	1
Sussex	2	Birkbeck	1

However, the research councils represent only a small proportion of the total research student population -- though one whose leverage is important. The most up-to-date figures from funding councils record 1079 full-time equivalent research students in geography (human and physical) in the UK offering a mean size of twenty-three research students per institution. Only nineteen institutions have graduate communities of that size or larger, with the top twelve departments contributing over half of the total (see table 2). The lowest ranking for a RAE grade 5* department is 14th, and the lowest grade 5 is 15th. Only three departments not grade 5 and above make it into the top fifteen. There are several grade 4 departments which feature down the list. We can speculate on the causes of the pattern, including available university funds, overseas recognition for the university as well as the department, the nomenclature and popularity of research degrees other than PhDs, and so on. We also need two cautionary notes regarding what effects we are seeing. First, we are simply ranking by size of graduate school -- relating these to numbers of staff produces a rather different picture of effort. I am wary that the staff figures are not entirely commensurate with the student figures and are currently publicly available for the English institutions, but they indicate a range of more than three research students per staff member at the highest loadings. Some of the larger numbers of students then get offset by large department size but this is not universal. A further study, looking at staff working might compare the balances of postgraduate and undergraduate funding and teaching going on here. It should also be made clear as a second reservation that research students feed in to the RAE scoring process, so these are linked not independent variables.

Table 2. Distribution of full-time equivalent Funding Council model research students (rounded to integers) according to most recent Funding Council data, with RAE(Research Assessment Exercise) scores.

Institution	1996 RAE	Research students	Institution	1996 RAE	Research students

	rating			rating	
Cambridge	5*	82.3	Queen's University Belfast	3a	17.5
Oxford	4	56	Glasgow	3a	17
Bristol	5*	49	York	3b	16.6
Leeds	5	47.3	Lancaster	4	16.2
Aberystwyth	4	46.5	Coventry	3a	15.8
Southampton	5	43.3	Hull	4	15.8
Sheffield	5	42.9	Queen Mary and Westfield	4	14.9
Kings College London	3a	42	School of Oriental and African Studies	3b	14.9
Birmingham	4	39.4	Portsmouth	3a	14
University College London	5*	39.4	Dundee	3a	14
Newcastle upon Tyne	5	35	Open (combined)[a]	4/3b	12.3
Edinburgh	5*	34	Bradford	3a	12.3
Exeter	4	32.4	St Andrew's	3a	12
Durham	5*	32.4	East Anglia	4	10.5
Royal Holloway	5	31.1	Plymouth	3a	9.6
Swansea	4	27.5	Cheltenham and Gloucester	3b	8.5
London School of Economics	4	25.4	Lampeter	3a	8
Nottingham	4	24.5	Birkbeck	3a	7.9
Liverpool	4	23.6	Huddersfield	3b	7
Leicester	3a	21	Middlesex	3b	7
Reading	3a	19.3	Strathclyde	3b	7
Aberdeen	3a	19	Loughborough	4	6.1
Manchester	4	18.4	Cardiff	2	6
Sussex	3a	17.5			

[a]The Open University is entered as two separate departments in the RAE, but here the numbers are combined.

Further speculations

This simple retrieval of data is inevitably more grist to the mill of gossip, 'strategy talk', and institutional competition. It is also likely to feed into this not only by informing, or misinforming, decisions about institutional priorities, but may also influence potential research students. The indication about research council awards may be particularly appealing, but of course the figures here are not the success rate. There are no data on numbers of applications from institutions which were rejected, or what topics they proposed to study. However, the pattern does seem clear. This raises

a few questions which the discipline needs to address collectively rather than competitively. First, what are the costs and benefits of research council students -- at what bottom threshold does it make (financial) sense to give up the game? Of course in terms of staff morale, attracting applications who may get internal funding, and so forth, there may be other reasons to justify playing the research council game. Second, what are the implications of concentration. Certainly the research councils make a cogent argument that a critical mass of other students helps the research process by providing an intellectual peer group and research culture. But what is that level? If we follow this are we moving to a situation of only a handful of departments hosting students? And what are the implications of that for the rest of the discipline? What are the implications for students not in these centres of graduate study? At the moment the counterbalancing trend is evident in the general numbers of research students, but these are concentrated broadly along research-selectivity criteria. To an extent this may be inevitable and desirable, if we say research ranking follows good research, and students use good research and publications to guide their choice of supervisors. Perhaps we need to address these sorts of debates, thinking through the implications rather than allowing institutional self-interest, competition, insecurity, and anxious gossip to drive the process.

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Footnotes

(1)There is a rangeof recognition categories -- differing for part-time and full-time students, collaborative students, and recognition for students who have already completed a 'recognised' course of research training. Some institutions have limited specialisms which the ESRC recognises as meriting recognition.

(2)It should be noted that some others are recognised for specialist training in a specific skill rather than generalist 'research training'.

(3)Or equivalent for the small number of part-time awards.

(4)That is, those who intend to gain an MPhil as opposed to the convention in some institutions to start doctoral candidates as registered for an MPhil and upgrade them.

(5)The anomaly that this is more than are recognised can be explained by legacy effects -- students already in an institution when it lost recognition -- and so-called mode B students who have already completed recognised training elsewhere and can be hosted in a department without a training course.

References

Kong L, 1999, "Asian higher education and the politics of identity" *Environment and Planning A* **31** 1525 - 1528

Passmore A, 1998, "Geogossip" *Environment and Planning A* **30** 1332 - 1336

Data sources

For ESRC studentships: http://www.niss.ac.uk/education/esr/esrc/HUMAN-GEOGRAPHY/esrc.html

For HEFCE: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/funding/default.htm

ESRC recognition criteria can be found at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/postgrad.html

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